

James 3: 1-12
Mark 8: 27-30
September 13, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

This morning's scriptures bring to mind the great passage from the book of Ecclesiastes which begins: "To everything there is a season." After number of examples, such as, "a time to be born and a time to die," we read, "a time to keep silent and a time to speak."

One of the hardest lessons in life is recognizing when it is a time to speak and when it is a time to be silent. Indeed it is the continuing plague of humanity that we are so often getting it wrong. We speak when we would better be silent. We are silent when we should speak.

The passage from James speaks directly to this fact. With a certain amount of irony James observes that, "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, keeping the whole body in check with a bridle." He likens human beings to horses who need a bridle with a firm bit in the mouth to guide the whole body in the right direction. Anyone who has ridden a horse, or watched a race horse being led in to a starting gate knows that even the best trained horses do not want to cooperate with where the rider wants them to go.

James' words apply to all of us. Like it or not we are all teachers. People observe how we are in the world. They are much less interested in the words we use that the way our lives point to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately there are a vast number of people who reject Christianity because of the way we present Jesus with the rhetoric that comes across on television and in the so-called social media. To millions of people we are seen as angry, rigid, moralistic apostles of an angry punishing God. We are also perceived as lackeys for extreme

liberal and conservative agendas. Churches and denominations are increasingly becoming cultural and ideological enclaves of people who all believe the same things.

The tragedy of this development is that the great name of Jesus which the apostle Paul called the “name which is above every name” has become in the popular mind a code word for the narrow agendas of contending opinions and moralities which appear to be completely unconnected with the proclamation that, “God so... *loved... the world...that he gave...his only son...that whoever...believes in him...shall not perish... but have everlasting life. **God sent the son...not to condemn the world...but that...through him...the world might be saved.*** (John 3: 16-17)

We may wring our hands and blame the world for its ignorance of Christ. We may blame the affluence of American culture which creates the illusion that we no longer need God. We may bewail that so many families who in the idyllic past used to fill our Sunday schools now find quiet Sunday mornings with no need to rush out to go to church a more attractive way of being together. In many cases church time has been replaced by community sports time. But the fact is we have done this to ourselves. We have so taken for granted the evident truth of Jesus that we have focused on secondary issues instead of proclaiming the name that is above every name and living lives molded life that flows from that name.

That is why I believe that the early Christian church preserved the encounter between Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. There in the community where the whole world of ancient gods had shrines and where people shopped for the religion that fit best for them, Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples respond by reporting what they have heard: John the Baptist returned from the dead, the prophet Elijah, whose return was believed

by many to signal the arrival of the messiah, or just one of the other ancient prophets. What is significant what they *don't* report; and that is, that the vast majority of people don't say *anything about Jesus*. He is a non-factor. He is invisible.

That is tragically true in our time and place. Thus Jesus changes the question: "But who do you say that I am?" Now take a picture of what happens next for it is exactly the right response. Eleven of the disciples say...nothing. There is no easy right answer. I imagine even Peter paused.

The very first word of the question hangs in the air and penetrates the heart. *But. Having identified what people are saying about me and recognized that most people are saying **nothing about me—who do YOU say that I am?*** Unlike all the others, who do you, my disciples, who have been with me day after day, heard my teachings, joined me in ministry and seen how people respond to me---*who do you say that I am?* You who have experienced my way with *you*, my love and care *for you* and your families, who do *you* say that I am?

Silence is the right response to this question. Great teacher that he is, I don't think Jesus wants a "right" answer. He wants the disciples to find *their answer*. Right answers lead nowhere in the spiritual journey. We can only grow from the ground on which we stand. A seed has been planted in our lives and we must nourish it and allow God to grow it where we are. In God's good time we will grow into a faith that we could not imagine at the beginning.

When Peter gives his immortal response, "You are the Christ," there is no congratulation. He tells the disciples to keep quiet. "And he *sternly* ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

This morning I suggest two reasons why Jesus tells his disciples to be silent.

The first is obvious; with Peter they may now know who Jesus in some intellectual way. But the fact is that they do not understand in the depths of their souls what it means that Jesus is the messiah. Thus Jesus tells them to be silent until it begins to sink in who the messiah truly is. Until then they are students whose primary job is to listen, learn and follow.

The second reason is this: Jesus' work as the messiah is incomplete. He must fulfill his destiny before his identity is completely revealed. He must be rejected by humanity, abandoned by his closest friends be executed on a cross and then God must vindicate his son as messiah by raising him from the dead. The world will reject Jesus because unlike the gods of Caesarea Philippi, he will not accommodate himself to suit the lifestyle and beliefs of the moment. The world must come to him on his terms. This includes in the words of Ecclesiastes as "season" of dying with the promise of spiritual rebirth.

In many ways this is good news for you and me. We have permission to be disciples—that is, people who listen and learn. Most importantly if the fact that we are not being asked to give public testimonies to things we do not understand yet.

But we nevertheless have important work to do if wish Jesus to have a significant role in our lives. We must *want* to learn about Jesus, his life and teachings. We must want the love of Jesus to take residence in our lives. Finally, we must be willing to follow in his way, not when we have time but all the time; not just in church life but in all life.

In this way, without our having to say words, our lives will proclaim the One whose name is above every name. We will proclaim the name of Jesus. Amen.